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Extending the Interpretative Route through Europe

Robin Skeates

Prehistoric Europe: Theory and Practice, edited by Andrew Jones, 2008. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell; ISBN978-1-4051-2596-3., paperback. xvi+378 pp. 101 figures, 2 tables

European prehistoric archaeology may be thriving, but is arguably also in need of a revised conceptual map. On the one hand, many well-established research themes and concepts have become insufficient for the challenges posed by an anthropological archaeology of people and by the contemporary politics of Europe. On the other hand, most European prehistorians find contemporary philosophies and their applications obscure, daunting, and not immediately relevant to their experiences of archaeological remains and practice. We should therefore be grateful that the chapters in this distinctive book offer examples of a variety of interesting and challenging routes forward.

Almost all of the contributors make use of the anthropological concept of biography to consider the multiple social relations, values, identities, and life-stages of prehistoric persons, material things, and places. Linked to this is an emphasis on context, which demands that any generalizations about prehistoric Europe take detailed account of the complex combination of local variability and human connectivity in relation to archaeological patterning across multiple analytical levels and categories. Although good to think with, less reliance is therefore placed on analogies with general anthropological theories or historically attested European traditions, so that the difference of prehistoric cultures can be allowed for. At the same time, more detailed critical thinking is called for regarding the intellectual and political history of archaeology, particularly in order to question recent interpretations of

European prehistory for present-day purposes. In practice, archaeologists are urged to push beyond their theoretical-, material-, regional-, and period-based comfort zones by creatively mixing their established approaches with those of other research areas in the social and ‘hard’ sciences, while perhaps trying to guard against the over-influence of scholarly fashions dictated outside of archaeology. Archaeological science stands to give and gain most from this convergence of new methods and theories, to engage interpretatively with old and new questions regarding, for example, ancestry, individual life-histories, embodied sensations, human mobility, or the origins of metallurgy. As the various clearly expressed chapters also demonstrate, archaeological writing and illustration can be made more accessible, particularly for students of archaeology, without compromising sophisticated theories and debates. A key consequence of adopting such approaches is the creation of significantly more nuanced and interesting interpretations of the archaeology of prehistoric Europe compared to those of the 1980s. What this also adds up to is an affirmation of the coming of age of interpretative or anthropological archaeology, which began to outgrow its radical post-processual predecessor in the early 1990s.

But this book also offers a measure of the impact of interpretative archaeology on European prehistory over the last 15 years. This could be claimed to be substantial, given the extensive application of themes and theories derived from interpretative archaeology across a wide range of European regional case-studies. But the list of authors and their bibliographies also reflects an archaeological tradition dominated by prehistorians from Britain, and extended by a handful of Anglophone scholars based in the USA, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Romania. Although a few of these scholars do acknowledge the importance of continental approaches, such as the French concept of ‘chaîne opératoire’ for artefact biographies, and do accept that archaeologies of identity are tied to the politics of the past, the overall impression this book provides is of a school of thought that has overlooked the deep

intellectual, linguistic, cultural, and national divisions evident in the theory and practice of prehistoric archaeology in contemporary Europe. Read in this light, the editor's stated intention to provide a flavour of the diversity of research in European prehistory, and his introductory history of archaeological thought relating to European prehistory that portrays the progressive replacement of 'traditional' archaeology by processual then interpretative archaeology, seem politically and historiographically naïve, as well as exclusionary to the majority of prehistorians across the 27 member states of the European Union who express limited interest in (and sometimes outright antagonism to) each successive incarnation of Anglo-Saxon archaeological theory.

The selected interpretative themes addressed by this book will be familiar to theoretically-informed archaeologists, but remain compelling and relevant to on-going research on prehistoric Europe. They are also well-served by the organization of the book's contents into seven thematic sections (analytical frameworks, landscape and place, the house, novel technologies, death and memory, bodies and identities, trade and exchange), each with a helpful and concise editorial introduction followed by a complementary pairing of chapters, written by specialists who generally place clear syntheses of their own well-worked research topics and up-to-date data-sets in broader theoretical and archaeological contexts. Pluciennik questions the long-standing intellectual division of foragers and farmers in social evolutionary anthropology and archaeology, and the ascription of negative values to hunter-gatherers, arguing instead for local variability and the significant agency of existing Mesolithic groups in Europe to the adoption of farming. Collis then describes the use of 'the Celts' as a classic example of heritage, in which the past has been reinterpreted for present-day purposes. Goldhahn applies to Scandinavia a series of interpretative archaeological ideas about the significance of Early Bronze Age monuments in the landscape, and illustrates them well with a wide range of images. Fontijn likewise builds up a complex interpretative model

of different zones in the Bronze Age cultural landscape of the Southern Netherlands, and especially of contrasting types of wet places, marked over time by special deposits of objects. Borić emphasizes the ideological, social, and experiential significance of the house and of house-societies in Neolithic Europe, in line with recent writing on the anthropology and archaeology of houses. Gerritsen then considers the temporal dimensions of houses in Bronze and Iron Age North-West Europe, including their significance as sites of social memory and forgetting. Gheorghoiu leaves the interpretative archaeological script somewhat, perhaps reflecting a lack of Eastern European access to costly international archaeological publications, and is consequently less anthropological and more idiosyncratic in his definition of a series of techno-complexes associated with the emergence of pottery across Europe. Ottaway and Roberts provide a useful synthesis of current archaeometallurgical knowledge on a European scale, with an emphasis on technological knowledge, choices, and processes, more than on use. Lillios argues that Neolithic persons in Western Europe, and especially in the Iberian peninsula, orchestrated their memories and identities by manipulating biographical objects, architecture, bodies, animals, and fire during rituals performed at collective burial monuments. Hanks continues this theme with reference to the question of how the living chose to memorialize the warrior lifestyle in later prehistory, concluding that warriors may actually have existed on the edge of their societies. Hofmann and Whittle then consider what the Neolithic felt like during the routines of specific cultural contexts in Central and Western Europe, arguing that bodies were not as individual and sharply bounded as they are today. Back-Danielsson likewise explores the socio-cultural construction of identities and bodies, with particular reference to the Scandinavian Late Iron Age treatment of dead bodies and reuse of cremated bones and other potent substances in various transformative processes. Chapman attempts a grand interpretative synthesis of Mesolithic to Early Bronze Age exchange in Europe over space and time, emphasising the social

significance of exotic objects. Wells then continues the story, in a less interpretative fashion, for Late Bronze Age and Iron Age Europe, emphasising the role that the interconnectedness of communities and élites played in identity expression and cultural change.

Together, these chapters cover a great deal of ground, doing some justice to the rich ethnographic diversity of (later) prehistoric Europe, but there are some notable thematic absences. Jones claims the best landscape archaeology often combines GIS-based digital images and phenomenological archaeology, but both are underrepresented in the landscape section in particular and in the book as a whole, as is palaeoenvironmental evidence and interpretations of its cultural dimensions. Religious beliefs are also down-played by most of the contributors, who represent ritual practices in prehistoric Europe primarily as secular social practices related to the construction of identities. Some of the key interpretative players in European prehistoric archaeology (e.g. Bradley, Hodder, Thomas, Tilley) are also absent as contributors, despite being ever-present in the chapter bibliographies.

Overall, this book represents a serious, accessible, and worthwhile attempt to provide an up-to-date interpretative synthesis of European prehistory. As such, it should be of significant use to a wide range of scholars. But it is representative of an Anglophone strand of archaeological theory and practice that needs to be more widely debated and modified by archaeologists throughout Europe before it can assume a position of orthodoxy.